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Anushka A. Jasraj

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Emily Dickinson in Vain

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor:

Lisa L. Moore

Heather Houser

Emily Dickinson in Vain

by

Anushka A. Jasraj

Thesis

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson in Vain

Anushka A. Jasraj, M.A.

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Supervisor: Lisa L. Moore

This is a biography of the nineteenth century poet, Emily Dickinson.

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1

Today I decided to write one hundred words every day for the next eighty days. These numbers are mostly arbitrary. I will also include Emily Dickinson on every page, since this is meant to be an essay about her. Judith Butler: “Invariably, a promise commits the body to an enduring or repeated action of some sort. But if we consider the body as bearing unconscious fantasy, it works precisely against intention.”

2

Let me begin by saying: I don’t know where I’m going with this. In the instructive essay, “Tactics for Not Knowing: Preparing for the Unexpected,” Emma Cocker writes: “An action is begun before knowing what it might enable [...] Submission to the logic of a rule or instruction can operate as a device for not knowing.” Perhaps searching too is a mode of *not-knowing*, of destabilizing the rigorous logics of mastery. “The challenge,” Cocker states, “is how to prevent these nascent assemblages from being assimilated all too quickly back into meaning, from becoming classified or (re)claimed swiftly by existing knowledge.”

3

The diary is “a series of dated traces.” I should include the date here. February 29, 2018. Scholars used handwriting analysis to date Emily Dickinson’s *Master Letters*. “The date is essential. The trace is usually writing, but it can be an image, an object, or a relic.” I’ve written five thousand words on hoarding disorder and Dickinson, but hoarding wasn’t

categorized as a disorder until recently, so my argument has no traction. C read my essay and asked, What is your system for digressions? For deciding how far down a particular path I will go? Wherever my desire takes me.

4

"This isn't an addiction memoir, per se. I am unwilling to share with you what parts of my life/this book are fact and what parts are fiction. I don't like to make such distinctions even for myself." - Elizabeth Ellen, *Person/a*.

5

The diary maintains coherence through repetition of the same three or four themes. Can a diary be a fictive trace? My early diaries are filled with anger towards my parents, and lists of my likes and dislikes. I like D because his aesthetics of care reminds me of my mother: he thinks he knows what's best for me. I like: coffee with honey, rainy days, sad poems, witches, hand-written letters, feminist performance art, cats, Anna Akhmatova, and dream pop. Emily Dickinson liked: pencils, her dog Carlo, George Eliot, gingerbread, writing letter-poems to Susan Huntington Dickinson, walking in the Amherst woods.

6

Before I started this biography of Emily Dickinson, I wanted to write an essay on the significance of the diary in India. I had been reading the diaries of Anaïs Nin, and Marina

Tsvetaeva's Moscow diaries, but hadn't encountered any diaries by South Asian women. A preliminary search online did not yield any useful results, so I sent a few emails to friends and professors, asking for recommendations.

7

I learned advanced google skills from a friend who used to be a private detective. Use google translate and search "women's diaries" in different Indian languages, he told me.

8

No search results found for "published diary by South Asian woman."

Search results for "Emily Dickinson": 9,540,000.

Search results for: "Emily Dickinson facts": 357,000.

Search results for "Women's diaries": 36,000.

9

You are not the famous artist from S.D. Chrostowska's book, *Permission*. You are not the cultural critic from Chris Kraus' *I Love Dick*. You are not Odysseus, Demophoon, Achilles, Hippolytus, Paris, Jason, Aeneas, Orestes, Hercules, Theseus, Macareus, Protesilaus, Lynceus, or Phaon. You are definitely not Thomas Wentworth Higginson.

You are someone who kept a diary, and kept it hidden. Luis Camnitzer: *This is a Mirror, You are a Written Sentence* (1966-68, vacuum-formed polystyrene mounted on synthetic board, 18 4/5 x 24 3/5 x 1/2"). Unlike Sophie Calle's *Henri B. in Suite Venitienne*, I'm not sure where to begin my search.

10

In the afterword to Shoshana Felman's playful literary theory book, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, Butler asks whether language holds the 'power to comport the body in the way that it decides.' She writes: "The promise is the speech act that is understood to compel the body to comport itself, in constancy, toward the other." What kind of utterance performs an investigation? Or: Can searching be categorized as a performative speech act? Do you know of any.... Can you tell me about.... Does the collection include.... I'm looking for....

11

Gyanendra Pandey, in the introduction to *Unarchived Histories: The "mad" and the "trifling" in the Colonial and Postcolonial World*: "An archival hierarchy persists, privileging identities, movements, datable events, the struggle over resources of state - documenting 'hard' historical facts, and underplaying those that are more difficult to grasp. When and how do we archive the body as a register of events; or gestures, pauses, gut-reactions; or deep-rooted feelings of ecstasy, humiliation, pain?" Pandey looks to what has been marginalized in institutional archival practice - that which is made

invisible because it is 'ephemeral, insignificant, obscure.' Where is Emily Dickinson's unarchived history?

12

In *Unarchived Histories*, Gyanendra Pandey: "The archive, as a site of remembrance - doing the work of remembering - is also at the same time a project of forgetting. What are the implications for our constructions of the past?" What is Dickinson's unarchived history?

13

It hasn't stopped raining all day. Once I am done writing, each page will take up ten kilobytes within the University of Texas at Austin's Online Library System. Still: this is not autobiography, not life-writing, because "the identity of the narrator and the principal character [are not] identical." Did I promise to keep these biographical traces in the order in which they were written? The last thirty will be in chronological order.

14

Jonathan Skinner, in a review of *A Spicing of Birds: Poems by Emily Dickinson*: "Apart from her 150 uses of the word 'bird,' she names the robin 38 times, the bobolink 12, the sparrow 9, the jay 7, the hummingbird 5, and so forth, down through crow and oriole 4, bluebird, phoebe, and wren 3, and blackbird 2, to just one mention of the nightingale." Say *bird* one hundred and fifty times. Say *robin* thirty-eight times. Say *nightingale* once.

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hummingbird Emily Dickinson

17

wren blackbird blackbird nightingale. Four ways for this biography of Emily Dickinson to fail: 1) I fail to write a successful biography; 2) I lose your trust; 3) I stop writing; 4) The rules do not provide adequate obstacles.

18

Emma Cocker: "There are at least four ways to fail a rule-based operation: 1) by failing to accomplish or achieve success in the task; 2) by breaking the rules; 3) by succeeding (if the *intent* was to fail); 4) by failing (if the *intent* was to fail) as the task has succeeded to fail, thus failed to be a failure."

19

I'm reading Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, in a dentist's waiting room. There's a line for the water cooler and everyone looks stiff, as if they are stuck to their chairs. "The rules break like a thermometer," she writes, "quicksilver spills across the charted systems, / we're out in a country that has no language / no laws, we're chasing the raven and the wren." I remember Emily Dickinson, who sent two hundred and seventy-six poems to Susan Dickinson while she lived in the house next door.

20

I gave my students an excerpt from Gerald Graff's *Clueless in Academe* because they wanted to know what kind of paper they were expected to write at the end of the

semester, and how many opposing arguments to include in their bibliographies. In the excerpt, Graff summarizes Deborah Tannen's argument on moving away from argument culture because of its 'warlike atmosphere' and 'ritualized combativeness.' I left out parts where he spins a counterargument. Later realized: should have just brought them a chapter from Tannen's book. Emily Dickinson's favorite flower: the crown imperial.

21

Attempting to define the Autobiographical Pact, Philippe Lejeune arrives at the following: "'autobiographical novel' is too close to the word 'autobiography,' itself too close to the word 'biography,' for some confusions not to arise. Is not autobiography, as its name indicates, the biography of a person written by him/herself?" After attempting to delineate the terms of this pact with scientific exactness, Lejeune concludes that a 'history of autobiography' would actually be a history of "the type of reading it engenders, the credence it exudes." Martha Dickinson Bianchi's reminiscences about her aunt, *Emily Dickinson Face to Face*, are often dismissed by scholars.

22

I will not always tell you the rules. From a review of *Emily Dickinson in Love: The Case for Otis Lord*: Emily Dickinson is: "a puzzle which scholars often seek to dismember and decipher, using her enigmatic verse as an instruction manual."

23

Amrita Sher-Gil in a letter to her parents in 1938: “I must admit it was a bit of a shock to hear that all my letters are being perused and destined to the flames! [...] I suppose I have to resign myself to a bleak old age unrelieved by the entertainment that the perusal of old love letters would have afforded.” Sher-Gil, then twenty-five, would come to be known as one of the eminent avant-garde painters of the twentieth century, alongside Kahlo. “I had left [the letters] behind not because I thought them dangerous witnesses,” she states. Lavinia burned ED’s letters.

24

I’ve misplaced my copy of ED’s *Master Letters*, or perhaps it has been stolen. I know what you’re thinking: Freud says there are no accidents, and no coincidences. Spent twenty minutes looking at Sher-Gil’s painting, ‘Three Girls,’ in a borrowed book. They look so sad – it feels impossible to read past their morose expressions. The three girls were Sher-Gil’s nieces: Beant Kaur, Narwair Kaur, Gurbhajan Kaur. They sat patiently over the course of three weeks, trying to remain still, trying not to laugh or sneeze as their aunt painted them. Sibia, Beant Kaur’s son: “[My mother] rarely talked about herself.”

25

A performative utterance is reduced to madness when the speaker lacks the ‘requisite authority.’ Emily Dickinson is requisite authority.

26

(I promise) the next five will be salvaged from an Amherst travel diary and sutured with lines from poems by Emily Dickinson.

27

Flew to Atlanta reading Summer of Hate. Atlanta to Hartford then the shuttle to Amherst. Computers eliminate shame, MG says. Why are people so dismissive of journals? ES working on book incorporating her father's incomplete memoir. My roommate is a cousin of John Waters. Her daughter just told her that she's getting a tattoo. So many trees. I imagine I would be happy here, but that's only because I would never actually live here.

28

A stranger mistook me for someone else and we had a brief conversation about breakfast. Joy said I build steps but then I drop them – need to keep going and explore a thing instead of moving to something new. DW read a Keats poem and an essay she wrote, much of which I cannot recall. West Cemetery: Emily Dickinson's grave. Did Agha Shahid Ali ever walk through here? I bumped into CB and we talked about strip clubs and Joy's sunglasses. Lots of little trees, flowers, a tiny bridge over shallow waters. *A something in a summer's day.*

29

I was bored, and longed to be outside. JT sent me pictures from Shanghai. Listening to Lou Doillon. I had the worst nightmares at 2.00 AM. J says its called sleep paralysis, which doesn't usually happen to me but I think he's right. Lynda Barry: "What is the past made of? After we read a book is it inside of us?" MG constantly laments the death of culture and brings everything back to that. Almost time to go home. *Twilight touches Amherst with his yellow glove. Miss me sometimes, Dear –*

30

PG sees craziness as a good position for writing from. Who was the writer that brought you into writing? Whose voices am I channeling right now? You can't have that but there's this, he pointed outside the window, and then to his chest. *I am alive – because.* PG stopped me after the lecture to say the myths started with the Rig Vedas etc. and came westward from there. I asked about Shahid. I have his job now, PG said. He talked a lot about rescuing things.

31

An email from JV: "You're sitting on a sofa in a house in my thoughts – even if I didn't intend for you to be – cross-legged, phone in one hand, book in the other. People live in this house round the clock, but no one is ever around; solitude follows this imagined you as if it is your second shadow. Do you remember when we joked that we were each

other's shadows? You were mine at midday and I yours at dusk. Safe travels; see you soon." I'm holding a book of poems: *Rooms Are Never Finished* by Agha Shahid Ali.

32

Emily Dickinson wore a white dress. "Emily Dickinson isn't you," Alexandra Pechman writes in a review of Jerome Charyn's novel, *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson*.

33

February 6, 2015: "Dear Anushka, If there were more diaries I would have for sure published them. Why she did not continue to write more I have no answer. Amrita started writing her diaries from 1920. She possibly would have written them till 1928, before her departure for Paris, but they are lost or destroyed. Nasreen Mohamedi, artist 1937-1990, wrote remarkable diaries. Her late brother Altaf published them privately in Mumbai. Best, VS."

34

I left my copy of *Master Letters* in DP's car but he's in Marfa now. I wrote an essay titled "Epistolary Apostrophe in Emily Dickinson's *Master Letters*." From AR: "Had an important dream about spiders – actually about their webs.... Deleuze and Guattari describe the way in which directional forces prefigure dimensional situations. And the way dimensional situations constantly give way again to the directional. I love this

thought." I feel comfortable stealing from AR because he expects it. Emily Dickinson is a refrain, or a "crystal prism." Later, I will talk about tedium.

35

I wanted to send you this poem. Maybe it's a weird poem to send someone but it's also a nice poem. Do you like Emily Dickinson? Maybe see you tomorrow. 'I promise I won't say a thing!': Your first promise to me and such a difficult one. Jeanne Dielman is an amazing film. I'm going grocery shopping you can drop by after. S and I saw two meteors and between us we made four wishes. Emily Dickinson baked a cake with nineteen eggs.

36

Emily Dickinson wrote hundreds of letters to the world. I realized we have very different taste/perception when it comes to people now I'm wondering how it plays into the way we interpret each other. Do we have nothing in common except this place? The doubling is another thing we have in common. I will need to use up the rest of the greens in a soup. How many soup pots do you have?

37

Emily Dickinson is the queen of the em dash. Emily Dickinson writes: *bring me the sunset in a cup*. I assumed she was making impossible demands then recently thought: a cup can hold the sunset just like our words can hold (and unlock) these psychic textures

of intimacies we haven't yet experienced. My obsessions exhaust themselves, are replaced by others, but an addiction recedes then returns like the tide trying to pull you under. Do you have unresolved issues you want to talk through? Wrote a list of actions for Emily's bedroom but how does it bring me closer to the secrets of the room.

38

"Trust is better than Contract, for One is still, but the other moves," Dickinson wrote in the early 1870s. You are writing from the future. I'm working in a void again and maybe I need to let the work dissolve.

39

What this could be: a dangerous witness, a diary of an enchantment, an attempt to exhaust an obsession. I'm forgetting the rules as I invent new ones. Is a forgotten promise the same as a *failure* to keep my word?

40

Emily Dickinson is enchantment. "Possessing some of the viscosity of shock, enchantment has none of its agitating and confrontational character; it offers rapturous self-forgetting rather than self-shattering," Rita Felski writes in her manifesto, *Uses of Literature*. Close reading as surrender: "a yielding that is not abject or humiliating, but ecstatic and erotically charged." I will insert two pages that are of no use, simply records of this yielding.

41

This is not a bibliomemoir. “An isolated dated trace is a memorial rather than a diary: the diary begins when traces in a series attempt to capture the movement of time rather than to freeze it around a source event.” When does a series of letters become a diary? I contend that Dickinson didn’t want readers to know the identity of Master, but it’s still fun to make a guess. Like when you’re thirteen, and your crush tells you she likes someone, and you hope she means you. DP tells me there are five types of crushes, or maybe seven.

42

Dear Prof. Dhar: I've been researching the history of psychoanalysis in India, and I'm looking for more information on Girindrasekar Bose's daughter. I was wondering if you know the title of her memoir, or have any other information on her writings? There's a brief mention of the daughter's visit to Vienna, in the correspondence between Bose and Freud. This captured my interest, but I haven't been able to find more information on her. Emily Dickinson travelled to Philadelphia in 1855. In Vienna, Durgabati Ghose taught Anna Freud how to wear a sari. Freud is obsessed with Ghose's fear of dogs.

43

I bumped into RM while I was on the way home from the dentist. We'd never met before, but spoke over email years ago because she's editing G.V. Desani's diaries. She's in

Austin for research. So good to meet you in the flesh, she said. Desani's diaries are at the Harry Ransom Center, and we are bonded by the fact that we've spent time with this misogynist ghost. I told her I'm writing about ED.

44

Emily Dickinson died in 1886. On Wednesday, April 22, 2015, RM wrote: "I've done some archival work on Attia Hosain in the UK, and was able to speak to her daughter about her diaries, which are still unpublished - there was an unpublished novel by her mother edited by her and released recently, but she remains reluctant to allow her mother's diaries to be published, for reasons that are complex: in part, it involves dealing with her own grief, but also at issue is imposing a narrative on her mother's life which her mother has no say in."

45

To whom is the diary addressed? Is the diary a poem? On Monday, May 18, 2015, RM wrote to me: "I think Lejeune gets it really right when he suggests we write diaries 'to build a memory out of paper, to create archives from lived experience, to accumulate traces' - my diaries are full of random bits of ephemera I've collected over the years." And then on June 4, 2015: "The archive is in no way a neutral space, and is shaped by institutional power, knowledge, and processes of remembrance. We thus have to ask questions as researchers about what makes it into an archive, and what is left out." And then on June 7, 2015, RM wrote: "Incidentally, if you're still on the trail for the diaries of

South Asian women, I've recently heard that the British Library acquired Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's papers, and I believe there may be some diaries in the collection."

46

Every instance of the phrase *I don't know* in emails written between 2012 and 2018: I don't know where I'm going with this letter, but I wanted to start writing back. I don't know how to reach you. I don't know any of your fantasies. I don't know what it means, and I still need to read the book. I still don't know what I want, but I know what I don't want. I don't know if that makes any sense. I don't know if Emily Dickinson's work should be read in its original context with spacing and punctuation intact.

47

I don't know whether the *Master Letters* were part of a longer correspondence or whether they were just three unsent missives. I don't know how he would feel about you. So many thoughts, but I don't know which thread to pull at. I don't know what I would say about it yet. I don't really know anything about the *Master Letters*. I don't know how to distance myself. Maybe I don't know how to triangulate it? I can't give you directions if you don't know where you are. I don't know why I forgot, or why it was so important to be able to remember.

48

I don't know what to say. I don't know if I'm coming to the party. Tell me something I don't know about myself. I don't know what you mean, and maybe you don't either. I don't know if I'll be able to articulate this properly. I don't know what you call it when you're courting someone in a friend way. I don't know your story. I don't know how to use snapchat. I don't know why it is but Emily Dickinson didn't like cats. I don't know how to begin again, but my first impulse was to write to you.

49

I don't know if you were joking about coming in full body armor. I don't know that it changed me in any way, but while I was reading it, I did sometimes see things in the way the voice of the book saw things. I don't really know what I meant to say when I started this email, but I guess this is just something I wanted to talk about some more. I don't know why I write to you when I'm sleepy. I don't know anyone with a life coach. I don't know how serious my question was. I don't know where time goes. I don't know if that's what I want. I don't know if I agree with Dodie Bellamy's idea that one should write to the point of discomfort. Is it weird that I like looking at holiday picture albums of people I don't know? Emily Dickinson scholars don't know whether there were other drafts of the *Master Letters*. I don't know if I've said this before but I miss you. I don't know if you'll still be the same.

50

I don't know who it belongs to but let me know and I'll get you another shot glass. I don't know why she told me so much. I don't even know where to begin with you. I don't know why I felt the need to mention that. I don't know Elsa Morante. I don't know why it felt right. I don't know why she doesn't. I don't know the right word. I don't know what illness Dickinson suffered from when she wrote, "Dear Master, I am ill."

51

Amrita Pritam wrote her diaries in Hindi. In 1985, she published excerpts in a slim volume called *Amrita ki Diary* (Diary of Amrita). Published by Rajpal, and edited by Imroz, the book is now out of print. A library in Goa has a copy, which my mother's friend photocopies and mails to me. My Hindi is mediocre at best, and I spend hours on each page, using a dictionary to translate the words individually, then trying to string their meanings together. In my excitement, I have scribbled all over my only copy of the book. ED liked reading George Eliot.

52

Amrita Pritam met Imroz when she was already married, and had two children. Their relationship has been documented in a collection of their letters: *In the Times of Love and Longing*. "You are my destination," Pritam writes. Some of the letters are records of a trip to Russia, where she felt lonely and elated and craved a good cup of tea. "O, how I long

for the tea that sets passions on fire. I am missing the tea we have back home - it virtually opens the pores of the mind and the body," Pritam writes on May 26, 1966.

53

William Waters, in *Poetry's Touch*, says that most utterances don't require a formal gesture of address. Sometimes there is a feeling, he says, "not so much unaddressed as underspecified for address." Emily Dickinson wrote on envelope scraps, on the backs of recipe pages, in the margins of her letters. She stitched her poems together into small books. In one of her earliest letters to Imroz, Amrita Pritam writes, "I waited for such letters all my life. This wait never became a reality but I kept writing replies to these letters. Many of my poems are replies to such unreceived letters."

54

14 August, 1977: Amrita Pritam dreams that her children are young again, and stealing her fingers. She writes about this recurring dream in her diary. ED: "We dream - it is good we are dreaming."

55

Amrita Pritam writes about a Bulgarian woman who says, I've never met your son but I want to marry him because I want you to be my mother-in-law. She touched my heart, Pritam says. What is the experience of reading ED in my mother tongue?

56

MH texts me pictures of pictures he took with a disposable camera: I'm holding a copy of *The Strange Library* by Murakami and looking up at him and smiling. In another picture he's in his car, which was stolen a week later, and he looks like he's about to sneeze. I've recorded the day in my diary, but also what's missing from the photographs. "My memory keeps getting in the way of your history," Agha Shahid Ali writes. He lived in the same town as Emily Dickinson.

57

The Thaumatrope, also known as the Wonderturner, was a philosophical optical toy invented by John Ayrton Paris in 1824. It consisted of a cardboard disc with an image on both sides. A bird and a cage, a flower and a vase, painter and canvas, a bald man and his wig. The viewer spun the disc with the help of attached strings, and the two images were combined through persistence of vision. The flickering image produced by the Thaumatrope is stillness in motion. Emily Dickinson's eyes were inflamed, and she feared going blind, but she enjoyed optical illusions in her childhood.

58

A description of the Phenakistiscope by its inventor, Joseph Plateau (qtd. in *Between Stillness and Motion: Film, Photography, Algorithms*): "The apparatus... essentially consists of a cardboard disc pierced along its circumference with a certain number of small openings and carrying painted figures on one of its sides. When the disc is rotated

about its center facing a mirror, and looking with one eye opposite the opening... the figures are animated and execute movements." The Phenakistiscope was one of the first optical devices of the nineteenth century to allow viewers to experience images in motion. Some people think Emily Dickinson had tuberculosis.

59

Dear X, What do I need to know in order to write a good essay about Emily Dickinson's bedroom?

60

Sometimes I lie because I value a good story more than I value the truth.

61

When one is caught, mouth open, addressing an empty room, would it be better to say:

- a) I'm just talking to myself here in this empty room.
- b) I knew you were there all along.
- c) Yes, I believe in ghosts.
- d) Silent reading desensitizes the body to the cadences of language.
- e) Look at the apple trees in the garden outside the window.

f) In her book, *The Value of Emily Dickinson*, literary critic Mary Loeffelholz claims that Emily Dickinson explored the 'shaming epistemology of the closet in writing addressed to a man.'

62

On 2018-03-01, X wrote: "The card I draw is the 8 of Staves. I used the Goddess Tarot. I read a little bit about her life and thought about the fact that she spent most of her life without leaving her bedroom. She also became known as reluctant to greet guests. I would like to share with you my impression that this room represents both a 'prison' and a place to 'travel' with ones phantasies. The room represents the parallel world in which Emily could look for surprising or sudden messages from unexpected sources."

63

Search the room for objects that don't belong to you. You are trying to understand the history of the room. Do not give in to despair if the room has no furniture. Try reading Jill Lepore's essay, "How to Write a Paper for This Class." Text your best friend a picture of the setting sun, and keep waiting while the room gets dark. Emily Dickinson had a Hitchcock chair in her bedroom, but Hitchcock went bankrupt, caught a 'brain fever,' and died in 1852. The authenticity of a Hitchcock chair can be established by the presence of a stenciled label.

64

The psychic says I can't ask any questions with answers such as yes or no, this way or that way, and stay or leave. I'm not allowed to ask future-specific questions either, and nothing that requires a numerical answer. A good question is a history as well as a historiography, she tells me. She wears a white dress like Dickinson, and she brought her own tablecloth, which has made-up star constellations printed in the shape of birds. For a hundred dollars, I could have spent my hour with a psychoanalyst instead. I wish I had a bag of castor sugar.

65

The psychic shuffles the cards casino-style with captivating urgency. She has more to tell me about the history of the room. The tabletop is eighteen square inches, and too small to fit all the cards when she lays them out. She asks me to hold out both hands, and places a card face down in each of my palms, then turns them over.

66

Over the telephone, I speak with a psychoanalyst-in-training who is also the friend of a friend I have previously been in love with. He asks about my childhood in India, and tells me I should read *Study of the Unconscious* by Henri Ellenberger because he thinks I have "creative illness," which could be a nice way of saying I have symptoms of psychosis but remain productive. I'm not looking for a diagnosis, but he has a soothing voice, so I lie

down on the floor to nap with the phone beside me like a pillow. I dream of Emily Dickinson.

67

I have measured the room wall to wall, including the exact distances between the bed, the desk, the bureau, and the door. This is in case the Homestead ever burns down and needs to be recreated to scale. The measuring tape is the stiff kind, which makes a whooshing sound as it retracts. I'm not an architect, but I think my father wished I had been one - or a painter even. I am none of those things. Instead, I write stories on pieces of paper, which I spread across the floor like a blueprint for a game of hopscotch.

68

Dickinson wrote: "One need not be a chamber to be haunted, / One need not be a house." Does this count as a poem about houses? Rainer Maria Rilke wrote a series of poems, not about houses but about windows. AR tells me to listen to the song "Room 29" by Jarvis Cocker and Chilly Gonzales because it's about a hotel room. *A comfortable venue for a nervous breakdown, a front row seat for a psychic shakedown*, Cocker half-speaks and half-sings over a sad melody.

69

I'm crawling on the floor on my hands and knees, trying to reach under the bed. What is the lifespan of a spider? I want to touch every surface with my fingertips even though no

trace of Emily Dickinson remains available to me in this room. Underneath the new floorboards I'm told there are scuff marks where she stood: facing the bureau and looking at the wallpaper. Not Emily Dickinson, but someone else's letters are cradled between the pages of a book I'm trying not to read over and over again. A splinter of wood catches my right index finger.

70

The psychoanalyst-in-training has been reading Adam Phillips' book, *Unforbidden Pleasures: Rethinking Authority, Power, and Vitality*. "The law arranges our wanting for us," he reads to me over the telephone. He tells me that hauntings - psychoanalytically speaking - are arranged by creating a forbidden. I place the tip of my tongue against the edge of the table, and then realize I'm following the instructions in reverse. No tongues, no writing implements except pencils, and definitely no touching the historic furnishings. Remain in your seat at all times, and wait like Emily Dickinson like "a house that tries to be haunted."

71

I own one white dress, which has blue flowers sewn onto the front. I should have worn my white dress, so I could be more like Emily Dickinson. The woman who threads my eyebrows wanted to know if I bought the dress in India because she's from India too, but my dress is from a store in Austin. I brought a stack of envelopes to write on. I'm unsure

whether I should write on the inside of the envelope then mail it, or write on all sides then place it inside a new envelope before posting my letter to AR.

72

AR likes imagining what I do when I rent a room for an hour. What is the story in which that time and space is made excessive, he wonders. Would it be a stretch of hours "commissioned" from afar? What is the re-repurposing of the room that allows you to actually move within such a now-alienated room, he asks. AR keeps writing to me even though I say very little these days. Our relationship has always been grounded in asymmetrical reciprocity. He wants a picture of me in the mirror, but I walk around the room pretending to be ED.

73

Simone Weil writes somewhere that attention is a form of prayer. I'm reading a prayer by Alice Notley where she asks Corpus Sagra da to help her "to be as tough as mean as Akhmatova / as durable as her last tooth." I pray to Alice Notley to help me be as disobedient as her, as Akhmatova, as Emily Dickinson. Notley understands why I'm suspicious when men say they like my work but for good measure I pray to Audre Lorde and Amrita Sher-Gil and Simone Weil and Marina Tsvetaeva and the Kashmiri saint Lal Ded who was sensible about everything.

74

I'm drinking coffee from a thermos and wondering whether I should hitchhike to Boston where Emily Dickinson's original bedroom furniture is on display in a room at Harvard University's Houghton Library. Elizabeth Bishop tried to hitchhike once, but was mistaken for a prostitute, and arrested. Do you want to hear me say the word cunt, AR writes in his letter. I'm turned on even though I'm menstruating, and everything hurts. Should I have stayed at home, and dreamed of this room instead? Some words, Emily Dickinson says, stimulate the eye like an *infection in the sentence*.

75

In Letter 3 when ED writes, "If you saw a bullet hit a Bird - and he told you he was'nt shot - you might weep at his courtesy, but you would certainly doubt his word," she is referring to the practice of shotgun ornithology. I want to scratch my name onto a hidden surface, perhaps the leg of a table. The room is a potential space for solitude; for a "benign forgetting of the body," as Phillips puts it. Desire and illness are states that make forgetting impossible because they make the body aware of surfaces, of boundaries.

76

I am looking for hidden surfaces, and the words already scratched onto them. Those who have been here before; the traces they've left for me to find in recognition. As Rita Felski describes it, what I'm looking for is: an affinity, a flash, a sense of attunement, prescience, to feel addressed, summoned, to have something change within me by way of

cognitive insight, self-understanding. The room doesn't absorb me as other rooms have in the past. In her book, *The Sense of an Interior*, Diana Fuss writes about how intimately Emily Dickinson has been associated with the house-museum in Amherst.

77

"The room I entered was a dream of this room," John Ashbery writes. I have traveled a great distance to meet this poem.

78

One morning MS sends me a poem about liars by Cate Marvin because he wants to make me laugh, and because I tell him I'm bored. The other day we had been talking about our individual styles of lying. I don't lie. I say absurd things that are obvious jokes and circumvent the truth, like when I say: I should get a civil war re-enactor to spend an hour with me in this room. MS doesn't lie either except by omission: always in a grey area. I send him a poem by Emily Dickinson, and he promises to write me a letter soon.

79

Cate Marvin, *Lying My Head Off*: "I learned another language. It translates easily. / Here's how: *What I say is not what I mean, / nor is it ever what I meant to say.*"

One day I will write a memoir and it will be dreamy, artistic, nostalgic, domestic, ecstatic, voyeuristic, uplifting, blissful, and Emily Dickinson. I will use a pink scented-marker to highlight sections of my diary for my memoir. This is a word-bank for my upcoming memoir like an archive is a memory-bank. This is also my eightieth thought in ED's bedroom. The letter is in the mail.

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